

**IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF PENNSYLVANIA**

BILLIE SUE ATKINSON,	:	Civil No. 4:16-CV-1686
	:	
Plaintiffs	:	
	:	(Judge Brann)
v.	:	
	:	(Magistrate Judge Carlson)
HAMILTON TOWNSHIP, et al.,	:	
	:	
Defendants.	:	

REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

I. Statement of Facts and of the Case

This case represents Billie Sue Atkinson's third foray into federal court. Atkinson's original complaint, which was filed in August 2014, was dismissed by the Court as flawed on multiple grounds. See Atkinson v. Judge Carlson et al., Civil No. 3:14-CV-1597. Atkinson then pursued a second lawsuit, which suffered a similar fate, dismissal, in 2015. Atkinson v. Tioga County, 4:15-CV-1305.

Undeterred, Atkinson has now filed a new complaint, which repeats and re-states many of the same flawed claims that led to the dismissal of her prior civil lawsuit. (Doc. 1.) The plaintiff's 23-page complaint is seemingly global in its reach, but is cryptic in its content. Indeed, the complaint is completely indecipherable.

Thus, the complaint recites no intelligible facts, contains no discernable narrative thread, and simply alleges in broad and confusing strokes that at various times in sundry ways the plaintiff's rights have been ignored. The complaint also suggests that the plaintiff has previously been a defendant in otherwise unidentified state criminal proceedings, where the plaintiff feels that her rights have been violated in some ill-defined ways. Furthermore, the complaint is largely devoid of factual detail that would enable us to determine what actually happened in this case and when these events are alleged to have occurred.

In this complaint, the plaintiff has asserted a right to proceed *in forma pauperis*, an assertion that we will construe as a motion for leave to proceed *in forma pauperis*. For the reasons set forth below, we will grant the plaintiffs leave to proceed *in forma pauperis*, but recommend that this complaint be dismissed.

II. Discussion

A. Screening of Pro Se Complaints—Standard of Review

This Court has a statutory obligation to conduct a preliminary review of *pro se* complaints filed by persons who seek leave to proceed *in forma pauperis* which seek redress against government officials. Specifically, we must assess whether a *pro se*, *in forma pauperis* complaint “fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted.” This statutory text, in turn, mirrors the language of Rule 12(b)(6) of the Federal Rules

of Civil Procedure, which provides that a complaint should be dismissed for “failure to state a claim upon which relief can be granted.” Fed. R. Civ. P. 12(b)(6).

With respect to this benchmark standard for legal sufficiency of a complaint, the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit has aptly noted the evolving standards governing pleading practice in federal court, stating that:

Standards of pleading have been in the forefront of jurisprudence in recent years. Beginning with the Supreme Court's opinion in Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544 (2007) continuing with our opinion in Phillips [v. County of Allegheny], 515 F.3d 224, 230 (3d Cir. 2008)] and culminating recently with the Supreme Court's decision in Ashcroft v. Iqbal –U.S.–, 129 S.Ct. 1937 (2009) pleading standards have seemingly shifted from simple notice pleading to a more heightened form of pleading, requiring a plaintiff to plead more than the possibility of relief to survive a motion to dismiss.

Fowler v. UPMC Shadyside, 578 F.3d 203, 209-10 (3d Cir. 2009).

In considering whether a complaint fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted, the court must accept as true all allegations in the complaint and all reasonable inferences that can be drawn therefrom are to be construed in the light most favorable to the plaintiff. Jordan v. Fox Rothschild, O'Brien & Frankel, Inc., 20 F.3d 1250, 1261 (3d Cir. 1994). However, a court “need not credit a complaint’s bald assertions or legal conclusions when deciding a motion to dismiss.” Morse v. Lower Merion Sch. Dist., 132 F.3d 902, 906 (3d Cir. 1997). Additionally a court need not “assume that a ... plaintiff can prove facts that the ... plaintiff has not

alleged.” Associated Gen. Contractors of Cal. v. California State Council of Carpenters, 459 U.S. 519, 526 (1983). As the Supreme Court held in Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544 (2007), in order to state a valid cause of action a plaintiff must provide some factual grounds for relief which “requires more than labels and conclusions, and a formulaic recitation of the elements of a cause of actions will not do.” Id. at 555. “Factual allegations must be enough to raise a right to relief above the speculative level.” Id.

In keeping with the principles of Twombly, the Supreme Court has underscored that a trial court must assess whether a complaint states facts upon which relief can be granted when ruling on a motion to dismiss. In Ashcroft v. Iqbal, 556 U.S. 662 (2009), the Supreme Court held that, when considering a motion to dismiss, a court should “begin by identifying pleadings that, because they are no more than conclusions, are not entitled to the assumption of truth.” Id. at 679. According to the Supreme Court, “[t]hreadbare recitals of the elements of a cause of action, supported by mere conclusory statements, do not suffice.” Id. at 678. Rather, in conducting a review of the adequacy of complaint, the Supreme Court has advised trial courts that they must:

[B]egin by identifying pleadings that because they are no more than conclusions are not entitled to the assumption of truth. While legal conclusions can provide the framework of a complaint, they must be

supported by factual allegations. When there are well-pleaded factual allegations, a court should assume their veracity and then determine whether they plausibly give rise to an entitlement to relief.

Id. at 679.

Thus, following Twombly and Iqbal a well-pleaded complaint must contain more than mere legal labels and conclusions. Rather, a complaint must recite factual allegations sufficient to raise the plaintiff's claimed right to relief beyond the level of mere speculation. As the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit has stated:

[A]fter Iqbal, when presented with a motion to dismiss for failure to state a claim, district courts should conduct a two-part analysis. First, the factual and legal elements of a claim should be separated. The district court must accept all of the complaint's well-pleaded facts as true, but may disregard any legal conclusions. Second, a district court must then determine whether the facts alleged in the complaint are sufficient to show that the plaintiff has a 'plausible claim for relief.' In other words, a complaint must do more than allege the plaintiff's entitlement to relief. A complaint has to 'show' such an entitlement with its facts.

Fowler, 578 F.3d at 210-11.

As the court of appeals has observed: "The Supreme Court in Twombly set forth the 'plausibility' standard for overcoming a motion to dismiss and refined this approach in Iqbal. The plausibility standard requires the complaint to allege 'enough facts to state a claim to relief that is plausible on its face.' Twombly, 550 U.S. at 570,

127 S.Ct. 1955. A complaint satisfies the plausibility standard when the factual pleadings ‘allow[] the court to draw the reasonable inference that the defendant is liable for the misconduct alleged.’ Iqbal, 129 S.Ct. at 1949 (citing Twombly, 550 U.S. at 556, 127 S.Ct. 1955). This standard requires showing ‘more than a sheer possibility that a defendant has acted unlawfully.’ Id. A complaint which pleads facts ‘merely consistent with’ a defendant's liability, [] ‘stops short of the line between possibility and plausibility of “entitlement of relief.” ’ ” Burtch v. Milberg Factors, Inc., 662 F.3d 212, 220-21 (3d Cir. 2011) cert. denied, 132 S. Ct. 1861, 182 L. Ed. 2d 644 (U.S. 2012).

In practice, consideration of the legal sufficiency of a complaint entails a three-step analysis: “First, the court must ‘tak[e] note of the elements a plaintiff must plead to state a claim.’ Iqbal, 129 S.Ct. at 1947. Second, the court should identify allegations that, ‘because they are no more than conclusions, are not entitled to the assumption of truth.’ Id. at 1950. Finally, ‘where there are well-pleaded factual allegations, a court should assume their veracity and then determine whether they plausibly give rise to an entitlement for relief.’ Id.” Santiago v. Warminster Tp., 629 F.3d 121, 130 (3d Cir. 2010).

In addition to these pleading rules, a civil complaint must comply with the requirements of Rule 8(a) of the Federal Rule of Civil Procedure which defines what a complaint should say and provides that:

(a) A pleading that states a claim for relief must contain (1) a short and plain statement of the grounds for the court's jurisdiction, unless the court already has jurisdiction and the claim needs no new jurisdictional support; (2) a short and plain statement of the claim showing that the pleader is entitled to relief; and (3) a demand for the relief sought, which may include relief in the alternative or different types of relief.

Thus, when a complaint is “illegible or incomprehensible,” id., or when a complaint “is also largely unintelligible,” Stephanatos v. Cohen, 236 F. App'x 785, 787 (3d Cir. 2007), an order dismissing a complaint under Rule 8 is clearly appropriate. See, e.g., Mincy v. Klem, 303 F. App'x 106 (3d Cir. 2008); Rhett v. New Jersey State Superior Court, 260 F. App'x 513 (3d Cir. 2008); Stephanatos v. Cohen, supra; Scibelli v. Lebanon County, supra; Bennett-Nelson v. La. Bd. of Regents, 431 F.3d 448, 450 n.1 (5th Cir. 2005). Furthermore, dismissal under Rule 8 is proper when a complaint “left the defendants having to guess what of the many things discussed constituted [a cause of action];” Binsack v. Lackawanna County Prison, 438 F. App'x 158 (3d Cir. 2011), or when the complaint is so “rambling and unclear” as to defy response. Tillio v. Spiess, No. 11-1276, 2011 WL 3346787 (Aug. 4, 2011).

In our view, these pleading standards apply to all aspects of the Court's threshold analysis of a complaint's legal sufficiency. Thus, we will apply this analysis both when assessing the adequacy of the factual assertions set forth in the complaint, and when examining whether a complaint properly invokes the jurisdiction of this Court.

B. This Complaint Fails to State A Claim Upon Which Relief Can Be Granted

Applying these legal benchmarks in this case, dismissal of this complaint is warranted because the complaint fails to meet the substantive standards required by law, in that it does not set forth a "short and plain" statement of a cognizable violation of some right guaranteed by the Constitution or laws of the United States. Some of the flaws in this particular *pro se* complaint are discussed separately below.

1. This Complaint Violates Rules 8 and 12(b)(1) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure

At the outset, dismissal of this complaint is warranted because the complaint fails to comply with Rule 8's basic injunction that: "A pleading that states a claim for relief must contain . . . *a short and plain statement of the claim* showing that the pleader is entitled to relief." Dismissal of this complaint is appropriate since it is well-settled that: "[t]he Federal Rules of Civil Procedure require that a complaint contain 'a short and plain statement of the claim showing that the pleader is entitled

to relief,’ Fed. R. Civ. P. 8(a)(2), and that each averment be ‘concise, and direct,’ Fed. R. Civ. P. 8(e)(1).” Scibelli v. Lebanon County, 219 F. App’x 221, 222 (3d Cir. 2007). Thus, when a complaint is “illegible or incomprehensible”, id., or when a complaint “is also largely unintelligible,” Stephanatos v. Cohen, 236 F. App’x 785, 787 (3d Cir. 2007), an order dismissing a complaint under Rule 8 is clearly appropriate. See, e.g., Mincy v. Klem, 303 F. App’x 106 (3d Cir. 2008); Rhett v. New Jersey State Superior Court, 260 F. App’x 513 (3d Cir. 2008); Stephanatos v. Cohen. supra; Scibelli v. Lebanon County, supra; Bennett-Nelson v. La. Bd. of Regents, 431 F.3d 448, 450 n.1 (5th Cir. 2005). Furthermore, dismissal under Rule 8 is proper when a complaint “left the defendants having to guess what of the many things discussed constituted [a cause of action];” Binsack v. Lackawanna County Prison, 438 F. App’x 158 (3d Cir. 2011), or when the complaint is so “rambling and unclear” as to defy response. Tillio v. Spiess, No. 11-1276, 2011 WL 3346787 (Aug. 4, 2011). Finally, a complaint may be dismissed under Rule 8 when the pleading is simply illegible and cannot be understood. See, e.g., Moss v. United States, 329 F. App’x 335 (3d Cir. 2009)(dismissing illegible complaint); Radin v. Jersey City Medical Center, 375 F. App’x 205 (3d Cir. 2010); Earnest v. Ling, 140 F. App’x 431 (3d Cir. 2005) (dismissing complaint where “complaint fails to clearly identify which parties [the plaintiff] seeks to sue”); Oneal v. U.S. Fed. Prob., CIV.A. 05-5509

(MLC), 2006 WL 758301 (D.N.J. Mar. 22, 2006)(dismissing complaint consisting of approximately 50 pages of mostly-illegible handwriting); Gearhart v. City of Philadelphia Police, CIV.A.06-0130, 2006 WL 446071 (E.D. Pa. Feb. 21, 2006) (dismissing illegible complaint).

Furthermore, we are also obliged to “*sua sponte* dismiss a complaint for lack of subject matter jurisdiction pursuant to Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 12(b)(1) when the allegations within the complaint ‘are so attenuated and unsubstantial as to be absolutely devoid of merit, ... wholly insubstantial, ... obviously frivolous, ... plainly unsubstantial, ... or no longer open to discussion.’ Hagans v. Lavine, 415 U.S. 528, 536-37, 94 S.Ct. 1372, 39 L.Ed.2d 577 (1974) (internal citations and quotation marks omitted).” DeGrazia v. F.B.I., 316 F. App'x 172, 173 (3d Cir. 2009).

Here, the complaint is prolix, cryptic, incomprehensible and is one of what is becoming a growing line of nonsensical complaints filed by this plaintiff in this Court. See Atkinson v. Judge Carlson et al., Civil No. 3:14-CV-1597; Atkinson v. Tioga County, 4:15-CV-1305. The complaint, therefore, fails to “contain ‘a short and plain statement of the claim showing that the pleader is entitled to relief,’ Fed. R. Civ. P. 8(a)(2), and [fails to meet Rule 8's requirement] that each averment be ‘concise, and direct,’ Fed. R. Civ. P. 8(e)(1).” Scibelli v. Lebanon County, 219 F. App'x 221, 222 (3d Cir. 2007). Further, the averments set forth in the pleading consist of an

apparent, but incomprehensible, catalogue of complaints, a litany of grievances that are presented without any context, content, coherence or continuity, making it virtually impossible to ascertain the legal and factual significance of these allegations. Thus, we are “left . . . having to guess what of the many things discussed constituted [a cause of action].” Binsack v. Lackawanna County Prison, 438 F. App’x 158 (3d Cir. 2011). In such instances, Rule 8 calls for the dismissal of the complaint.

Further, “the allegations within the complaint ‘are so attenuated and unsubstantial as to be absolutely devoid of merit, ... wholly insubstantial, ... obviously frivolous, ... plainly unsubstantial, ... or no longer open to discussion.’” Hagans v. Lavine, 415 U.S. 528, 536-37, 94 S.Ct. 1372, 39 L.Ed.2d 577 (1974) (internal citations and quotation marks omitted).” DeGrazia v. F.B.I., 316 F. App’x 172, 173 (3d Cir. 2009). Therefore, “the complaint is subject to dismissal because it presents a cause of action that [seems to] ‘ “rel[y] on “fantastic or delusional scenarios.”’” Neitzke v. Williams, 490 U.S. 319, 328, 109 S.Ct. 1827, 104 L.Ed.2d 338 (1989).’” DeGrazia v. F.B.I., 316 F. App’x 172, 173 (3d Cir.2009).” Gilboy v. Mellow, 3:CV-12-1237, 2012 WL 3957977 (M.D. Pa. June 29, 2012) report and recommendation adopted, 3:12-CV-1237, 2012 WL 3959270 (M.D. Pa. Sept. 10, 2012).

In short, in this case, where Atkinson’s claims: (1) mirror pleadings filed in the past by this plaintiff and dismissed by this Court, see Atkinson v. Carlson, No. 4:14-

CV-1597, 2014 WL 6901144, at *17 (M.D. Pa. Aug. 18, 2014), report and recommendation adopted, No. 4:14-CV-1597, 2014 WL 6901139 (M.D. Pa. Dec. 3, 2014); (2) persist in “recit[ing] no intelligible facts, and simply alleg[ing] in broad and confusing strokes that at various times in sundry ways the plaintiffs' rights have been violated,” Atkinson v. Carlson, No. 4:14-CV-1597, 2014 WL 6901144, at *1 (M.D. Pa. Aug. 18, 2014), report and recommendation adopted, No. 4:14-CV-1597, 2014 WL 6901139 (M.D. Pa. Dec. 3, 2014); and (3) the meaning of the complaint is something that only the plaintiff can discern, we conclude that “[t]here is no question that [Atkinson’s] claims meet this standard [for dismissal under Rule 12(b)(1)], as they rely on fantastic scenarios lacking any arguable factual basis.” DeGrazia v. F.B.I., 316 F. App'x 172, 173 (3d Cir.2009).

While civil rights *pro se* plaintiffs often should be afforded an opportunity to amend a complaint before the complaint is dismissed in its entirety, see Fletcher-Hardee Corp. v. Pote Concrete Contractors, 482 F.3d 247, 253 (3d Cir. 2007), dismissal with leave to amend is not necessary when granting further leave to amend would be futile or result in undue delay. Alston v. Parker, 363 F.3d 229, 235 (3d Cir. 2004). Here, taken together, the structural flaws in this complaint are beyond any form of repair. Therefore, granting leave to amend would, in our view, be futile. Accordingly, this complaint should be dismissed without any further leave to amend.

III. Recommendation

Accordingly, for the foregoing reasons, the plaintiff is GRANTED leave to proceed *in forma pauperis*, and IT IS RECOMMENDED that the plaintiff's complaint be dismissed with prejudice.

The Parties are further placed on notice that pursuant to Local Rule 72.3:

Any party may object to a magistrate judge's proposed findings, recommendations or report addressing a motion or matter described in 28 U.S.C. § 636 (b)(1)(B) or making a recommendation for the disposition of a prisoner case or a habeas corpus petition within fourteen (14) days after being served with a copy thereof. Such party shall file with the clerk of court, and serve on the magistrate judge and all parties, written objections which shall specifically identify the portions of the proposed findings, recommendations or report to which objection is made and the basis for such objections. The briefing requirements set forth in Local Rule 72.2 shall apply. A judge shall make a de novo determination of those portions of the report or specified proposed findings or recommendations to which objection is made and may accept, reject, or modify, in whole or in part, the findings or recommendations made by the magistrate judge. The judge, however, need conduct a new hearing only in his or her discretion or where required by law, and may consider the record developed before the magistrate judge, making his or her own determination on the basis of that record. The judge may also receive further evidence, recall witnesses or recommit the matter to the magistrate judge with instructions.

Submitted this 15th day of August 2016.

S/Martin C. Carlson

Martin C. Carlson
United States Magistrate Judge